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AUTHOR Parish, Thomas S.; Hortin, John A.
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ABSTRACT

Although recent findings generally show that father loss can significantly affect children's self-concepts, no previous research has studied the impact of mother loss on children's self-concepts and evaluations of parents. To provide insight into this question, 1,177 college students evaluated themselves and their mothers and fathers. In contrast to earlier research on father loss which found that evaluations of fathers were enhanced by their demise and diminished by their divorce, the findings indicated that evaluations of mothers dropped drastically in cases when the mother died, particularly for males if their remaining fathers remarried or for females if their remaining fathers did not remarry. In addition, self-concepts of males were significantly higher than those of females, but only if the male students were from intact families and not from any of the alternate family configurations. The results suggest that the area of parent loss may be more complex than originally thought. (Author/JAC)

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IMPACT OF MOTHER LOSS ON EVALUATIONS OF SELF AND PARENTS

Thomas S. Parish
John A. Hortin

Kansas State University

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The Impact of Mother Loss on
Evaluations of Self and Parents

THOMAS S. PARISH, Kansas State University
JOHN A. HORTIN, Kansas State University

Thomas S. Parish, Professor
John A. Hortin, Asst. Professor
College of Education
Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS 66506

Recent findings, particularly by Parish and his associates, have generally shown that father loss can be a particularly important event in terms of their children's subsequent self-concepts (e.g., Parish & Dostal, 1980; Parish & Taylor, 1979) and/or evaluations of parents (Parish, in press; Parish & Kappes, 1980). Specifically, in the wake of divorce and subsequent father loss, children's self-concepts and evaluations of parents have been found to be diminished markedly. Interestingly, evaluations of parents, but not themselves, were actually found to be enhanced if the natural father's absence was due to his death.

Remarriage by the remaining parent (i.e., the mother) was also found in some instances to actually benefit the child to a moderate degree in terms of their self-concepts (see Parish & Dostal, 1980; Parish & Taylor, 1979; Young & Parish, 1977) and evaluations of fathers (see Parish & Dostal, 1980).

Notably, the findings cited above have generally been found to hold for adults who lost fathers during their childhood (e.g., Parish, in press; Young & Parish, 1977) as well as for children who had experienced such a loss more recently (e.g., Parish & Dostal, 1980; Parish & Taylor, 1979). Such common findings across age groups seem to suggest that the impact of father loss is not simply an event, the effect of which is quickly overcome, but may linger on for years.

These findings are particularly disconcerting as one considers our nation's increasing divorce rate and consequent increase in father absences. Even more disconcerting, however, is that due to our increasing divorce rates and recent trends in judicial decisions mother absences are on the increase, too. For if children are so markedly affected by such a common practice as father absence due to divorce (or even his death), then how much more are these children going to be affected in terms of their self-concepts or evaluations of parents in the wake of mother absence as a result of either her death or divorce? Since no previous research has been reported regarding this question, the focus of the present study is to provide answers and insight regarding what are the possible effects of mother loss.

Method

A total of 1,177 undergraduate students (both males and females) voluntarily participated in the present study. These students were enrolled in various sections of an educational psychology course at a large midwestern university. Each of these students responded to various forms of the Personal Attribute Inventory which was developed by Parish, Bryant and Shirazi (1976). Noted at the top of each form was a different target group, i.e., "yourself," "your father," "your mother." The order of these forms was counterbalanced. From the 50 positive and

50 negative adjectives listed alphabetically on these forms, the students were directed to select exactly 30 words that were most descriptive of the target group in question. Students' scores on these inventories were the number of negative adjectives checked for each target group in question. After the inventories were completed additional information was requested regarding their family structure (i.e., whether or not they had lost their mother, and if so, the cause of the loss), the respondents' gender, etc.

Notably, the design of this study was to compare those from the following familial configurations in terms of how they evaluated themselves, their mothers and their fathers:

(1) Males and (2) females from intact families.
(3) Males and (4) females from divorced remarried families where the the natural mothers were absent.
(5) Males and (6) females from divorced nonremarried families where the natural mothers were absent.
(7) Males and (8) females from married families where the natural mothers had died.
(9) Males and (10) females from nonremarried families where the natural mothers had died.

Curiously, however, out of the 1,177 students who responded in the present survey none were from catagories 5 and 6, thereby precluding these catagories from any part of the anaylsis. More will be said about this later.

Results

Three one-way analyses of variance were used in the present study to compare the different sexes from different familial configurations as described above.

For ratings of self (i.e., self-concepts), the first analysis demonstrated that these evaluations did vary significantly across groups ($F[7,1164] = 2.80$, $p < .01$). As indicated by the Least Squares Means post hoc analysis, the mean self-ratings of male students from intact families ($M = 2.85$) were significantly more positive than the self-ratings of female students from intact families ($M = 3.98$). Otherwise, no other significant differences between all possible points of comparison were found to exist in the present study regarding self-concepts.

Regarding evaluations of mothers, this analysis also found that these ratings varied significantly across groups ($F[7,1159] = 10.96$, $p < .001$). In this instance, however, the Least Squares Means post hoc analysis indicated that females from nonremarried families where the natural mother had died ($M = 20.33$) were significantly more negative in their evaluations of their mothers than any other comparison group. Furthermore, males from remarried families where their mother had died ($M = 10.00$) were significantly more negative in their evaluations of their mothers than females from remarried families where their mother had died ($M = 0.20$)

No other significant differences were found between any other points of comparison.

In contrast to the above mentioned findings regarding the evaluations of mothers, fathers were not found to vary significantly between any of the comparative groups ($F_{7,1169} = 1.30$, $p > .05$).

Discussion

The findings from the present study have shown that females from nonremarried families where their mother had died were particularly disparaging of their absent mothers. In addition, males from remarried families where the mother had died also tended to be quite negative in their evaluations of their deceased mothers.

Such findings markedly contrast with previous research that has shown that the father's death actually serves to enhance their children's evaluations of them (see Parish and Kappes, 1980). Besides contrasting with research on father loss, the present findings are made even more difficult to explain due to the paucity of previous studies dealing with the impact of mother loss. Nevertheless, where mothers have died and the remaining fathers have or have not remarried, these fathers, and those who counsel them, should be aware of the present findings so that they might endeavor to offset such a negative stigma from developing.

While the present findings suggest that the father's remarriage following the mother's death may be more facilitative in terms of how the females -- but not the males -- rate their deceased mothers, no such comparison was possible in the wake of their parents' divorce. More specifically, according to the respondents in this study, all of their fathers who experienced the loss of their wives (i.e., their children's mothers) through divorce, subsequently remarried, thus negating any comparison between children's ratings of their mother (or father or self) as a function of whether or not the father had remarried. To say the least, however, this was a surprising circumstance which will need to be studied further through forthcoming research endeavors to determine (1) why this is so, and (2) what advantages or disadvantages are associated with it for the family and its various members.

Another interesting finding reported in the present study is that for those from intact families only, males were found to have higher self-concepts than females. These findings, which support the general notion that males have higher self-concepts than females which has been reported previously by a number of researchers (e.g., Horner, 1968; Levy & Stacy, 1973; O'Leary, 1974), suggest that these sexist views are primarily limited to those from intact families rather than to those from alternative family forms.

In summary, the reader should take special note that unlike in cases of father loss where divorce has had the most negative impact in terms of evaluations of parents (see Parish & Kappes, 1980), the findings from the present study suggest that the loss of the mother through her death most negatively impacts upon her children's evaluations of her. Such findings certainly suggest that the area of parent loss is highly complex and cannot be easily understood without a great deal of study.

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Table 1

Absence Due to Death of the Natural Mother:

A Comparison Using the Personal

Attribute Inventory

	Nonremarried	Remarried
Females	20.33	0.20
Males	7.00	10.00